

Assignment: Plato commentary

Of the text: 'Allegory of the Cave' (*The Republic Book VII*)

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Student: Ludovica Schaerf

The Ἀπορία that Turned Plato into an Elitist

Paraphrasis

In this paper I will focus on the analysis of the second part of book VII of *The Republic*, where Plato draws some conclusions on the descent of the philosopher back in the cave. Engaging in a dialogue with Glaucon [517a], Plato narrates the grotesque fate of the philosopher: Once returned to the cave, he is not understood by his former fellow prisoners and his statements on the revealed reality look terribly absurd to them. Subsequently [518d], leaving those considerations unresolved, he explains the foundation of his gnoseology: intelligence cannot be taught, it can only be brought into being, and accordingly, humans have a predisposition towards this quality, which only needs to be addressed. Finally, these premises, along with others, lead Plato to a rather elitistic conclusion [520c]: he transposes the allegory into a political view in which the philosophers, being in possession of a greater truth, are the rulers of the πόλις. This picture, in opposition to the democratic Athens, does not ponder any sort of dialogue between the philosopher-kings and the δῆμος.

Why this passage

I decided to analyse this passage for mainly two reasons. In the first place, because I consider Plato's political view probably the most arguable in his whole philosophical system;

Secondly, because the gnoseological consideration [518d], in which, as I will discuss later, resides the *απορία*, gives birth to the debate between innatism and empiricism and will be discussed in similar terms even in Kant.

The logical contradiction

As previously mentioned, Plato draws some political conclusions from his considerations on the theory of knowledge: the city must be governed by philosophers, who will reign ‘in a state of waking’ since they are able to discern the ‘phantoms’ of the apparent world, having seen the idea of Good. In this paper, I will not argue this decision of leaving the city’s government in the hands of the philosophers, rather, I will dispute the modality of this government he strives for.

Although only subtly hinted, the relationship that will be established between the ruler and the rest of the population is one of compliance: all the deliberations are made by the philosopher while the rest of the city must limit his reach on what he has been assigned to. This view is allegorically justified by Plato when he alludes to the philosopher returning in the cave: Although he is in possess of a greater truth, the fellow prisoners do not seem to understand that his dim sight is not due to a jump ‘from darkness to light’ but one ‘from light to darkness’, and he becomes a ‘source of laughter’. In this description, the philosopher looks hopeless just like Baudelaire’s albatross: He is destined not to be understood by his companions to the point that every possibility of establishing dialogue with them is vain. The contradiction becomes clear when one examines why the prisoners do not accept his teachings: They must not be in possess of intelligence (yet). If we were to follow Plato’s words in the epistemological argument, we would conclude that they ‘haven’t turned their eyes’ yet; However, he also claims that the power of facing the bright side is ‘in the soul of each’. Here arises the question: if the prisoners of the cave (the citizens) do not yet show

intelligence, why does the philosopher limit his efforts to ruling them and does not try to ‘turn their souls’ back to the world of Ideas, to which they are linked through αναμνησις?

Other perspectives on the problem

At a first glance, this discrepancy seems to inevitably lead, as a ‘damage’, to this anti-democratic political view, of rulers and populace. Nonetheless, I argue that Plato would have reached the same conclusion anyhow: In fact, we can interpret this inference not only from the logical perspective but also from a philosophical and historical one. Taking into account his philosophical system, we can detect an alternation between dualism and gradualism: He is the first in his metaphysics and the latter in his epistemology and, respectively, this is mirrored in the text from the fact that there are only two types of humans, those who stay in the cave and those (the philosophers) who manage to escape [515c], but at the same time knowledge is a process, that starts from the recognition of the ‘shadows’, to the one of the ‘phantoms’, to ‘the things themselves’ [516a]. So, once again, are those prisoners in the cave eager and able to learn and understand or is intelligence precluded from them?

Allowing for a more historical instance, Plato has witnessed the failure of the democratic institution established after the thirty tyrants, that was responsible for Socrates’ death and was progressively turning into a demagogy. The ideal form of government, at this point, was to be found in the past administration of Solon, in what we would now define an ‘enlightened monarchy’. This solution, although it explains his inner necessity of autocracy, left unresolved the problem of centering the power in the hands of the few (oligarchy) with the risk of a degeneration into tyranny.

Why is it an *απορία*?

The most straightforward resolution, and the only one that seems plausible in this framework, is to allow a dialogue between the philosopher-kings and the δημος, instituting,

as Solon himself did, a version of the *ἐκκλησία* where the producers, the auxiliaries, and the guardians can voice their problems. This would be preferable given that the constitutional institution would limit the possibilities of it becoming a tyranny, but, at the same time, this would, on the logical headset, lead to a contradiction with the other of the two premises: It would presuppose, in the allegory, that the prisoners were able to understand the philosopher's teachings and were not to see him as a 'source of laughter'. To conclude, the two premises in the argument are inherently contradictory, and therefore, every consequence falls into an *ἀπορία*.